

TREES IN SOLITUDE

Eighteen simple prayers: a pilgrimage for Pentecost

MICHAEL MCGIRR

In the weeks of isolation, gyms, pools, tennis courts, skate parks and bowling greens have all been closed. So many of us have been out walking. I have found a few extra minutes to notice and enjoy the trees in our neighbourhood. As I have stretched my legs each day, they have become a bit like friends, waiting patiently for my visit, standing quietly while the rest of us keep moving. They have drawn me a little deeper into the mystery of life and into prayer.

From Psalm 65

The ends of the earth stand in awe

At the sight of your wonders.

The lands of sunrise and sunset

You fill with your joy



MORNING

I often meet this tree in the first hour of my day.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of wonder. On a cold morning, as the sun breaks through, the world feels fresh and new.

But we know it isn't.

We know you have been at work for countless ages, asking the human family to spread our branches to welcome your light.

May we find beauty in ourselves this day and in all the people we meet.



THE STREET

We park our ageing vehicle under this magnificent carport.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of courage. I have marvelled at the colours in my own street this year, right outside the front gate. The sun lights up the leaves. Give me courage to put my life on hold as I rush in and out.

Give me courage to be late getting somewhere so I don't miss what you have brought right to my door.

Help me to know who is my neighbour.



AUTUMN

The keen gardeners in our area prepare all year for this time. In the still days of autumn, the fruit ripens and sets. Old trees show they haven't lost their sense of purpose. They seem so pleased with what they have done.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of fear of the Lord.

This seems a strange phrase these days.

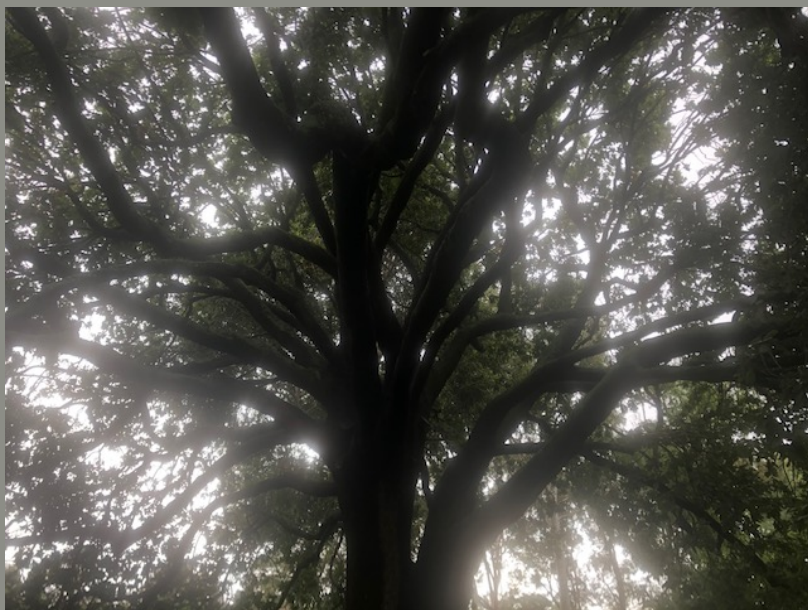
To me, it means fear of no other person and certainly no other thing.

Holy Spirit, take possession of our imaginations so we do not cripple ourselves with dark thoughts.

Allow us to stand up straight and tall in the midst of creation and claim what you want for us.

Enable us to enjoy what you hold out.

May we be generous to others, not frightened of them.



MOTHERS DAY

On Mothers Day, there was no visiting. We went for a walk on a track we didn't know so well and, when it started to rain, sheltered under this superb oak. Our children asked if it was a tree like this that had been cut down to make our dining table, the heart of our home.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of reverence. May we revere all those whose sacrifices have mothered us and especially, of course, our own mothers, living and dead. May we respect the mystery of our own lives and of all life, in whatever form it surprises us. May we nurture others, not cut them down. May we give them space to grow.



THE GINKO TREE

A Ginkgo Tree lives in the park where we walk the dog. The Ginkgo's healing properties are the stuff of legend. It was thought to be extinct but about 100 years ago a small number were found in the care of monks in a remote corner of China. The monks and trees had looked after each other through the centuries.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gift of your healing.

May you breathe easily in our lives.

May our lives help to bandage an aching world.

May we wait patiently for the unfolding of your will.

May we be soothed by your grace.



THE TURKISH OAK

This tree was planted from acorns brought back by soldiers after World War I. It has outlived those who planted it and reminds us of their journey. It still scatters acorns, signs of hope that great things continue to grow from small beginnings.

Holy Spirit, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.



WINTER

We live close to a place called Sycamore Street. The trees there always remind me of the man in the Sycamore Tree, Zacchaeus (Luke 19), the person whose exploitation of others had led him to a lonely and wintry place.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of your warmth.

Draw us closer to others.

Help us to climb after relationships based on justice, humility and honesty.

Help us to laugh at ourselves when our branches are bare.

Bring us down from the perches where we have put ourselves above others.



THE CHINESE ELM

A few streets away, near the Turkish Oak, there is a Chinese Elm. I love these trees. They grow slowly and are in no great hurry about anything. They lay their limbs along the ground, almost as if they don't want to get too tired. There are often children sitting on them.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of your gentleness.

Help us to be gentle with ourselves, to know when it is time to put down our burden and when it is time to take up someone else's. Jesus said you would give us a peace the world cannot give.

Lead us beside restful waters.



THE OLIVE

Since we got married, we have planted olive trees in every place we have lived. They put the world in perspective. If you look online, you can find photos of olive trees that are over 2,000 years old. Their gnarled trunks and withered limbs are beautiful. Planting an olive tree is an act of surrender. You know it will outlive you.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of hope. We can't see the future.

But we prepare the soil and gather compost, knowing that the cycle of life is bigger than our plans.

Psalm 128 says that our children are like slips of olives around our table.

May we give thanks for the vision of our parents and their parents.

May your love bring us to a mature and timeless faith, one that serves without needing to control.



THE RIVER RED GUM

In the school where I work, there is a beautiful river red gum. Whether you come by train or drive, you have to go past it. In normal times, it sees the beginning and end of my working day. An expert told me it is at least 350 years old, possibly more. It has deep roots that go hundreds of metres to the river. It was providing shelter long before Europeans came this way.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of understanding.

May we honour and respect the indigenous people who cared for our land for thousands of years.

May we appreciate our small but beautiful place in your plan.

Help us to understand those with whom we work. Allow us all to sink deep roots and draw life from the timeless mystery of your love.



THE EYE TREE

When we moved into our house, our children were still little. They loved this tree in the backyard and called it the 'eye tree' because it appeared to be looking at them. It tickled their imaginations. The kids have grown a lot, but the tree is still much the same. In the days of lockdown, we enjoyed having lunch under its shady branches. Sometimes, the kids had their online lessons sitting there.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gifts of knowledge and insight.

May we always look past the surface of our lives to see what is really sheltered there. At the start of the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius prayed that may we want and choose only the things that help us reach the end for which we have been created.



SPRING

I work at a school with many, many vibrant teenagers. They are great. It is a wonderful time of their lives and I am privileged to share it. This tree is one of a number that have been planted outside our chapel. For all their energy, I sometimes wish my students could stop to appreciate the gentle movement of the seasons. Their time for that will surely come.

*Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of patience.
Not all of life is about getting things done.
May we wait in joyful hope for whatever you
bring.*

*St Paul tells us that the whole of creation has
been groaning in one great act of giving birth.
May we too wait for you to set us free.*



THE REFLECTION

There is a track near us that used to be part of a railway line. It includes some ponds and, in the right light, the reflections in them are so real that you could easily be deceived.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gift of right judgement.

Guide us to know and accept all that is real, not to be seduced by images.

St Paul's Letter to the Romans tells us that the spirit comes to help us in our weakness. We all have a weakness for what looks good. Keep our prayer grounded and our hearts lifted high.



THE WALK

In the days of isolation, the parks in our area were more popular than ever. There were signs telling us to keep a safe distance but there was still a strong sense of community among walkers, runners, dog walkers and even dog runners.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gift of self-control.

When we don't feel like getting out of the house, you give us a nudge.

You ask us to stretch ourselves in every way, to practice what we preach which means staying at it.

Help us to make the choices today and every day which lead to your deepening your life within us.

Don't let us get stuck.



OLD FRIENDS

In the late afternoon, this pair are often together. Perhaps they are married. Perhaps they are just friends. They often share something to eat.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gift of fidelity. May we appreciate the grace of intimacy in our lives and never take our closest relationships for granted.

May we bring freedom into the lives of those we love, not keep them hostage to our own anxieties and insecurities.

St Paul says you are not the spirit of slavery but of love, helping us to find again our baby words to say 'abba', 'daddy', no matter how old we are.



SUMMER

In winter, the Golden Elms look bare and dignified, happy to be alone. In the hot weather, they take us in and welcome us into a cool space.

Holy Spirit, thank you for the gift of calm. Help us to step away from the heat of the moment, to allow our angers room to subside. Give us strength to let things go, to keep our cool when the wrong words could do even more damage. May we live in a way that slows the warming of our planet in every sense.



EVENING

The sun sets behind our house. The close of day is drawing us back inside but, for a moment, the sky reminds me that the world is big and I am small. The world keeps turning and I am only part of its load. I thank God for the day and pray for another.

Holy Spirit, thank you for your gift of kindness. May I look back with gratitude on what I have been able to do, the conversations I have had, the food I have eaten, the people I have loved.

*Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace*

*Be there at our homing and give us, we pray
Your love in our hearts, lord, at the eve of the day.*



NIGHT

A month after Easter, my children are standing under a large moon in the back yard. It refuses to be easily photographed. I tell them that God is like that. The image you have is always a bit blurred, but this does not mean it is not beautiful or not true. It is what we have tonight as darkness enfolds us. Tomorrow, the search goes on.

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.
Kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your spirit, Lord,
And they will be created.
And you will renew the face of the earth.
Amen*

